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The Public Service

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Comptroller General
of the United States

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The President of the Senate
The Speaker of the House of Representatives
The President-elect of the United States

This second transition series report addresses an issue that is not as visible as most but maybe more important—the need to assure that the government has top-quality people to carry out the programs of the President and Congress and hold them accountable for achieving results. The laws, regulations, and processes of government are only as good as the people who have to carry them out. All too often we have not paid enough attention to these critical factors—quality people and accountability—needed to assure successful implementation of government programs.

The issues discussed in this summary report are based primarily on reports and testimony already provided to Congress.

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Improve the Public Service

Reestablishing the integrity and credibility of government against the backdrop of budget deficits, limited resources, demands for new programs and initiatives, and critical national and international crises that are bound to develop will not be easy.

To a large extent, the government today is faced with a "people problem." How can the federal government attract, motivate, and retain committed people—people at all levels who can come up with new ideas and innovative approaches and see them through to effective implementation?

Image Building

Concern is mounting that the government's ability to acquire and retain good people is diminishing. There are major risks associated with this situation.

If the quality of the federal workforce is reduced, the quality of government services and programs is reduced. The bottom line in this situation is not less profit, but, more importantly, less effective government services—services that touch the lives of literally millions of people—and, therefore, less respect for the government. Sophisticated systems and controls are only as good as the people who must carry them out.

In 1987, more than 500 federal employees, at all levels, were convicted of criminal offenses related to their jobs. With a workforce of about 3 million, the 500 is minuscule. But numbers are misleading. When such offenses occur, especially among higher level officials, respect for and confidence in the government diminishes.

Theodore Roosevelt talked of using the presidency as a "bully pulpit." Today, this kind of leadership is needed to invigorate the public service.

After years of "fed-bashing" the new President needs to change course. In 1987 governmentwide surveys, many federal managers reported lower motivation levels. Personnel officers said that the negative image of public service was a significant barrier to attracting needed staff. Only 13 percent of senior executives said they would advise people beginning their careers to enter public service.

Addressing Pay Problems

You get what you pay for. Unfortunately, the federal government's pay structure has broken down.

The White House Science Council, the President's Blue Ribbon Commission on

Defense Management, and his Commissions on Compensation of Career Federal Executives and on Federal Pay have all concluded that the inadequacy of federal compensation seriously affects the government's ability to attract and retain a high-quality workforce. According to a recent report—Civil Service 2000—done for the Office of Personnel Management, this problem is expected to worsen over the next decade.

What has been the result of the breakdown of the pay system? Some examples follow:

- Over half of all federal personnel officers we surveyed in 1987 said that their ability to hire competitively over the last 5 years has worsened.
- The Federal Aviation Administration, Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and Social Security Administration (SSA) had substantial difficulty attracting or retaining flight controllers, revenue agents, and computer specialists.
- Over half of the government's senior career executives we recently surveyed said they would likely accept a desirable position outside the federal government if one became available.

Changing the situation will take time, but the foundation for improving the public service must recognize the following:

1. The morale and credibility of the federal workforce can be greatly improved if the President himself uses public forums to express his support for high-quality public servants.

2. Political appointees must adhere to high ethical standards and make ethics in government a priority in their agencies.

3. The pay and benefit structure for political and career employees needs to be changed. We cannot continue to expect to make progress in this area by saying that all solutions must be "budget neutral" and that agencies must continually absorb the costs of all pay and benefit increases.

Achieving Accountability

Even with the above improvements, however, successful development and implementation of government policies and programs is not a sure thing.

A strong force mitigating against success has been the continued excessively adversarial relationship between the executive branch and Congress. Conflict and debate are inherent in our political system. But there needs to be a better consensus on

what is important and what we are trying to achieve.

Contributing to the problems is the lack of continuity and consistency of leadership in executive departments and agencies. Changing gears and direction every 18 to 24 months at agencies contributes to ineffective management.

- Rapid turnover of leadership, resulting in several changes in direction, and insufficient technical leadership and staff were seriously impairing SSA's and IRS' efforts to modernize their computer systems. This has adversely affected the cost, accuracy, and timeliness of SSA's and IRS' service to the public and could have even greater impact in the future if modernization progress does not improve.

- High turnover, inadequate training, lack of career paths, and questionable ethical conduct among some officials and staff involved in the defense procurement system have contributed to cost overruns, flawed competition and negotiations, and negative public perceptions concerning the weapons acquisition function.

- The lack of strong central leadership has been a major factor behind the limited

progress being made in the government's war against drugs.

Congress is too often faced with dealing with new people from the executive agencies who have to spend too much time learning on the job.

What can be done? We can't expect all political appointees to commit to specific terms of office—that may not even be desirable. But we can expect a more coherent approach to development of goals and how to achieve them.

The lack of measurable goals and objectives makes it difficult to know whether important programs and initiatives are succeeding. Lack of a consensus on how to judge success tends to exacerbate political differences. Rather than focusing on ways to improve situations, too much effort is spent defending or attacking positions.

- Transportation safety is a major concern and improved safety has been a major transportation goal. While the overall number of deaths from transportation accidents has declined, accidents and fatalities continue to be a matter of serious concern in all modes. Further, near mid-air collisions between aircraft and high-risk incidents in the other modes continue at

alarming rates. Transportation needs to build on efforts already underway in the aviation area to develop early warning indicators of safety risk and modal performance, and this effort should be extended to the other modes. These indicators could be used to identify and remedy unsafe conditions before accidents occur and provide a measure of whether important safety programs and initiatives are succeeding.

- Over the years, the government has devoted substantial resources to control the supply of drugs. We have increased spending on drug interdiction activities by almost 1,500 percent from 1977 to 1987. Yet drugs are still widely available today. It is time to reassess federal drug abuse control strategy. Further primary emphasis on supply reduction programs will probably not solve our country's drug problem. More resources need to be assigned to demand reduction activities.

- The Nation has spent over $500 billion to deal with a host of environmental problems. The Environmental Protection Agency is trying to manage for results. But there are no specific, measurable operational objectives to gauge our progress. Congress and EPA have not always agreed

on environmental priorities and what is needed to meet legislative mandates.

- For years administrations have been trying to improve the Defense Department's major weapons acquisition function. Commissions have called for the need to establish clear authority for acquisition policy, clear accountability for acquisition execution, and plain lines of command for those with program management responsibilities. Defense keeps trying to implement such recommendations but how do we decide whether we are succeeding?

  There are potential political risks in identifying objectives and agreeing to be held accountable for meeting them. Many factors beyond the control of any individual official or group of officials can affect outcomes. But does that mean we should not try? We believe it is important to begin the effort. A more collaborative process between the President, his agency heads, and Congress for identifying a manageable number of priorities and objectives and then assessing progress towards those ends can reduce the political risks for everyone.

  The politics of governing is not always glamorous. It requires paying attention to who is going to do the jobs of government

and knowing when they are succeeding. But if we pay more attention to these factors, program success is more likely to occur.

Related GAO Products

Comptroller General's Letter to Paul A. Volcker, Chairman, National Commission on the Public Service (Jan. 14, 1988)

Senior Executive Service: Executives' Perspectives on Their Federal Service (GAO GGD-88-109FS, Jul. 20, 1988)

The 1988 Tax Return Filing Season and IRS' Fiscal Year 1989 Budget (GAO/T-GGD-88-30, Apr. 13, 1988)

FAA's Air Traffic Controller Staffing Standards (GAO/T-RCED-88-8, Nov. 18, 1987)

Superfund: Improvements Needed in Workforce Management (GAO/RCED-88-1, Oct. 26, 1987)

Federal Employees: Trends in Career and Noncareer Employee Appointments in the Executive Branch (GAO/GGD-87-96FS, Jul. 8, 1987)

Social Security Administration: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness (GAO/HRD-87-39, Mar. 18, 1987)

Managing IRS: Actions Needed to Assure Quality Service in the Future (GAO/GGD-89-1, Oct. 14, 1988)

Federal Workforce: Pay, Recruitment, and Retention of Federal Employees (GAO/GGD-87-37, Feb. 10, 1987)

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